



Guest opinion

Rein in Endangered Species Act laws

By John Thompson

Arguably the biggest threat to agriculture interests in the West is the Endangered Species Act.

Signed into law in 1972, the ESA's original purpose was to protect such species as the bald eagle and the manatee. Subsequent reauthorizations have expanded the scope of the act to the extent where over 1,200 species are now protected under federal law.

In spite of several examples of significant recovery of various species -- including wolves in the northern Rockies -- very few of those animals have ever been removed or down-listed from endangered to threatened. Currently, and in spite of astounding population gains, environmental groups have filed lawsuits to block U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service efforts to down-list wolves from endangered to threatened.

When a landowner loses the use of land under the ESA, that loss is not compensated by the government. This is unfortunate and provides no incentive for landowners to help recover populations of endangered plants and animals.

Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Calif., and several other western congressmen have been fighting for ESA reform for the past 10 years. Many of them believe the act produces more lawsuits and property disputes than it provides protection for wildlife.

A shining example of this problem exists north of Challis where federal agency officials are attempting to recover bull trout populations in several small streams. A lawsuit filed by the Western Watersheds Project and ruled on by Judge Lynn Winmill has taken away water rights on a ranch owned by Ward and Clay Jones.

The Jones family has drawn a small amount of water from Morgan Creek for the past 50 years to irrigate a pasture where hay is grown to feed their cattle.

Although no bull trout have been found in the diversion ditch and there is no documented proof that the diversion ever harmed a bull trout, the taking has

significantly reduced the amount of hay the ranch can produce, causing a serious economic burden. The Jones family may sell the land to a developer.

This is a classic example of the ESA being used as a tool to bludgeon rural America. If abuse of the ESA turns the head of Morgan Creek into a golf course ringed with summer homes, will this create a better environment for bull trout?

Farm Bureau supports reasonable reform of the ESA to provide landowners with incentives to help endangered plants and animals. Comprehensive reform of the ESA should include scientific peer review of ESA decisions, compensation for landowners for any reductions in property values, elimination of listing based on subspecies, distinct populations, or isolated populations of species plentiful in other areas and cost-benefit economic analysis performed prior to listing.

Preserving endangered species is certainly a worthy cause and an important societal issue.

Private landowners support significant populations of all kinds of plants and animals, but they shouldn't be forced to bear the expense of saving species alone.

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